**Bardic Poetry, Irish**

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**Word-count** 2,999

**Main text**

'Irish Bardic Poetry' is used by modern scholars to refer to poems written in syllabic metres in a standardised literary language common to Gaelic Ireland and Scotland between c. 1200 and c. 1650. The metrical system and standardised literary language (Classical Modern Irish) were the result of a long evolution from the seventh century to the thirteenth. Bardic poetry was practised by families of learned, hereditary poets, who composed formal praise poetry for their aristocratic patrons, religious poems, and historical and genealogical verse. Depending as it did on the patronage of traditional aristocratic Gaelic society, Bardic poetry fell into disuse in the political turmoil of the seventeenth century. Besides their linguistic, literary and metrical interest, Bardic poems are an invaluable historical source which shed light on culture, politics and society in Gaelic Ireland and Scotland c. 1200-c.1650.

The English term 'Bardic poetry' is a misnomer, as the verse so designated was the work, not of the comparatively unlearned poet known as the *bard*, but of the learned and prestigious *file.* A Bardic poet (*file*) required rigorous training in order to master both the intricate metrical rules that he was expected to observe in composing formal verse for his patron(s) and the artificial literary language in which he composed that verse. The language of formal poetry, Classical Modern Irish, was not the vernacular of any region of Ireland or Scotland, but a standardised literary language based primarily on the spoken language of Ireland c. 1200, which remained largely unchanged for more than four centuries. It allowed dialect, archaic and even artificially progressive linguistic forms (Ó Cuív 1973a), and thus gave the poet great flexibility in meeting the many requirements of the complex metrical system which had taken shape by c. 1200. It has been argued that the linguistic standard and metrical system of Bardic poetry must have been the result of a conscious reorganisation of the profession of poetry by the poets themselves in the late twelfth century, in the wake of the Norman Invasion and the rise to prominence of the Cistercian Order in Ireland. Other scholars emphasise the gradual evolution towards metrical and linguistic norms. It has also been suggested that the prominent Ó Dálaigh family of poets may have been particularly influential in spurring these developments (Simms 2007).

The most important source for the language and metrics of Bardic poetry remains the Grammatical and Syntactical Tracts compiled by contemporary poet-scholars. These tracts are a testament to the highly developed grammatical and metrical tradition that underpinned Bardic poetry. The tracts discuss topics such as stressed and unstressed words, pronunciation, spelling, the declension of nouns, the morphology of verbs, the formation of compounds, points of syntax, the complex rhyming system, and the faults to be avoided in poetry. Some didactic poems, which distil Bardic teaching on points of language and metrics and were probably directed at student-poets, have also survived. Poems by the Bardic poets themselves also provide information on the training which they underwent in schools run by master-poets to obtain the rank of *ollamh* 'master-poet' themselves (McManus 2004). Women were not admitted into Bardic academies or known to practise as professional poets, though it is not beyond the realm of possibility that some women may have composed loose verse in syllabic metres, and a small number of such poems is attributed to aristocratic women in manuscripts.

Approximately 2,000 Bardic poems survive in manuscript, not counting syllabic poems in prosimetric texts, such as family histories, sagas, and romances. The regional and temporal distribution of these poems is not even, a state of affairs which probably reflects a combination of contemporary socio-economic factors and the vagaries of manuscript transmission over the centuries. The majority of poems are from late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Ireland. The corpus of extant Scottish poetry for the whole period is quite small. There are three main types of contemporary poem-book (*duanaire*), in which Bardic poetry is preserved (Ó Cuív 1973b): (1) miscellanies containing poems written by various poets to members of various families; (2) collections of poems by a single poet or family of poets; (3) poem-books containing the work of various poets for a single patron or family. Outstanding examples of the first category are the Book of the Dean of Lismore, compiled in the first half of the sixteenth century in Perthshire, the most important source for poetry in later medieval Scotland, and the Book of O'Conor Don, written in 1631 at Ostend, the greatest single extant source for Irish Bardic poetry from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Into the second category falls the collection of poems composed in the fifteenth century by members of the Ó hUiginn family written in 1473 and bound in Trinity College MS H.2.16 (1318). There are many examples of the third category, including the Book of Magauran, the earliest extant Bardic poem-book, written in the fourteenth-century and containing poems for members of the Mág Samhradháin family of modern-day County Cavan. Much poetry, however, has come down only in late manuscripts which post-date the collapse of the Bardic order in Ireland and Scotland.

Though the teaching and transmission of Bardic poetry required a literate culture, Bardic poetry itself was designed initially to be sung or chanted (not by the poet himself, but by a reciter). Each poem is normally divided into a number of quatrains. Though the poet had a large number of metres to choose from in which he might compose a poem, in practice it seems that a fairly small number of metres was preferred. Each metre is distinguished by the number of syllables per line and the particular metrical ornaments required in each quatrain. For example, *séadna* (*dán díreach*) requires that the odd lines (*a*, *c*) of a quatrain have eight syllables in total, concluding in a stressed disyllabic word ($8^2$), while the even lines (*b*, *d*) must have seven syllables, concluding in a stressed monosyllable ($7^1$). There is 'alliteration' (a rough rendering of Irish *uaim*, which differs in many respects from alliteration as understood today) in every line and linking alliteration between the final word of *a* and the first stressed word of *b*. The final words of *b* and *d* rhyme with one another. All of the stressed words in *c* rhyme with stressed words in *d*. In *comhardadh slán* 'perfect rhyme', stressed vowels, long vowels and diphthongs must be identical in both rhyming words, single consonants must normally belong to the same 'class', as defined in the Tracts, according to particular phonetic properties (the voiceless plosives *p*, *c* and *t*, for example, form a separate 'class' from the voiced plosives, *b*, *d* and *g*), while consonant clusters only rhyme when certain phonetic features (voicelessness, continuation, sibilance) are represented in both the clusters in question. The metrical complexity of a given poem depends also upon whether the poem is written in *dán díreach* 'straight verse', the most rigorous form of Bardic poetry and the best attested in manuscripts, that most often used for formal praise and religious poetry, or metrically loose *óglách*as, the form of verse favoured for less formal verse as well as for some genealogical and historical poems. *Brúilingeacht*, in which all the metrical ornaments of *dán díreach* were required but the strict rules of rhyme were somewhat relaxed, is poorly attested in manuscripts and seems to have been the preserve of particular families of poets and of poet-historians. Poems vary greatly in length, but each complete poem will conclude with a *dúnadh*, a metrical echo of the beginning of the poem.

Formal poems (such as praise-poems and eulogies) to secular patrons make up the majority of extant Bardic verse. These poems typically stress the noble ancestry of the honorand, his generosity to poets, his beauty, and bravery in battle. In some poems a *caithréim* or list of battles that the honorand has fought may be given or the poet may describe the good weather, peace, tranquillity, and extraordinary fertility of the land brought about by the honorand's just rule in his lordship. In

elegies, the poet generally describes the chaos, in the natural world and in human society, brought about by the death of the honorand. Though most praise-poems are directed at men, influential aristocratic women were also the subject of praise-poems and elegies and are also sometimes mentioned in poems addressed to their husbands or fathers. The manner in which panegyric and elegy are expressed is in general highly stylised and conventional. These poems often contain allusions to native and classical literature, as well as complex and occasionally quite obscure genealogical and onomastic references. Some poems include apologues, short parables which reinforce the argument of the poem, which might be drawn from native history, scripture, apocrypha, Classical, English or continental literature. To formal Bardic poetry belong also historical and genealogical verse, which, being the work of poet-historians for their aristocratic patrons, shares many of the same qualities as praise-poetry; indeed, it is unwise to draw too stark a distinction between the poet-historian (*seanchaidh*) and the praise-poet (*fear re dán*) in this period, as many poets pursued both professions, and as the praise-poet was expected to be versed in the history and genealogy of his patron.

The poet-patron relationship might be a long-term contractual relationship or a more informal association, depending upon whether the poet was employed as the honorand's *ollamh* (master court-poet) or not. The *ollamh flatha* 'king's master-poet' was a highly-trained poet attached to a particular lord and was expected to regularly compose poetry in praise of his patron and to mark various important events in the honorand's life, as well as composing a eulogy on his death. In exchange, he normally enjoyed high social status, a tax-free estate, and other material rewards. In Bardic poetry, the poet's relationship to his patron is sometimes described as a marriage, and this conceit is described in terms that can strike the modern reader as homoerotic. Aristocrats who did not hold the headship of their family or lordship of their local kingdom were also known to engage court-poets of their own. That the relationship between poets and their patrons could at times become strained, however, is clear from poems in which the poets seeks belated payment for a praise-poem or in which poets seek reconciliation with patrons after being dismissed from court. Indeed, in their poems Bardic poets openly celebrated the arrogance of their order and urged their patrons to show them indulgence. Praise-poems were also composed by visiting poets who held no fixed position in the honorand's household or who were present on an embassy for another patron. Freedom of movement was such that an Irish chief, for example, might be visited not only by representatives of local poetic families, but also by poets from other regions in Ireland and even from Scotland. While travel in the later middle ages could be arduous, it is clear that the practise and patronage of Bardic poetry did extend across the Straits of Moyle. The famous Irish poet Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh (†c. 1250), for example, fled to Scotland after killing a servant of his patron and is believed to be the progenitor of the Scottish Mac Mhuirich branch of poets. Tomaltach Mac Diarmada (†1458), lord of a small kingdom in modern Co. Roscommon, was praised not only by poets from his native province of Connacht, but also by a Scottish poet named Giolla Críosd, who describes journeying from Scotland to Ireland to request a harp of the Irish lord; poems in honour of Tomaltach are preserved in the Book of the Dean of Lismore as well as manuscripts of Irish provenance. Bardic poets did not address their panegyric exclusively to the 'native' Gaelic families: Gaelicised Norman families such as the Butlers of Ormond or the Fitzgeralds of Desmond were also great patrons of poets, and in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth-centuries Bardic poets also addressed occasional poems of praise and petitions in verse to important English figures in the colonial administration. As well as propagandists, Bardic poets functioned as counsellors and ambassadors for their patrons and, together with ecclesiastics, might act as guarantors of agreements between nobles, the threat of excommunication from the church and satire by poets being incurred by any party that violated the agreement. There is evidence of a belief in the later middle ages that a poet's satire could do actual bodily harm to, and even kill, the object of the poet's invective.

Though the Church was at times hostile to the Bardic order, particularly in the fourteenth century,

approximately a fifth of extant Bardic poetry is religious. This poetry includes devotional poems on God, the Virgin Mary or the saints, as well as instructional verse on topics such as the danger of sin and the shortness of life. Some of these poems are the work of professional poets, who, in addition to their activities as praise-poets for secular figures, turned their attention to sacred themes in the hope of winning heavenly reward; others are the work of poets, such as the Observantine Franciscan brother Pilip Bocht Ó hUiginn (†1487), who devoted their talents exclusively to religious verse and entered religious life. Pilip Bocht's poetry reflects a revival in devotional life in the fifteenth century. Bardic religious verse was later used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to combat Protestant ideas as part of the Counter-Reformation.

Besides formal and religious poetry, some personal or occasional poetry survives in manuscript, such as, for example, Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh's moving poem on the death of his wife. Though not always categorised by modern scholars as 'Bardic poetry' proper, the standardised literary language and metrics of Bardic poetry were used to write courtly love poems, some of which are explicitly attributed to professional poets. In addition, 'Fenian lays', stories concerning Fionn mac Cumhaill and his warrior-bands, and other ballads were also composed in the syllabic metres.

Despite occasional challenges from ecclesiastics hostile to praise-poetry and periods of economic depression in which patrons were less inclined to support poets, Bardic poetry seems to have permeated learned culture in later medieval and early modern Gaelic society from the thirteenth century down to the mid-seventeenth. The Tudor Conquest of Ireland in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century and the Cromwellian Conquest of the mid-seventeenth century, however, undermined the social and economic basis of patronage on which Bardic poetry relied. Some Bardic poets expressed in verse their frustration at the decline of their status and prospects, and the rise to prominence of song-makers. From the late sixteenth century, *amhrán* or song-metre, which had a long sub-literary history behind it, began to be reproduced in manuscripts and ultimately supplanted syllabic verse as the dominant form of poetic expression, though syllabic poetry continued to be copied by scribes into modern times.

In modern scholarship, the work of editing and interpreting the Tracts and Bardic poetry itself, pioneered in the twentieth century by scholars like Osborn Bergin, Eleanor Knott and Lambert McKenna, continues. The majority of Bardic poetry is available in print, though not all has been edited or translated to modern scholarly standards (or at all). An on-line database of Bardic poetry (http://bardic.celt.dias.ie/) provides a convenient index to the extant corpus, including information on the date of composition of individual poems, their manuscript context and motifs. In historical discourse, the usefulness of Bardic poetry as a mine of biographical, cultural, literary and socio-economic information is widely recognised, particularly due to the work of Katharine Simms. Attempts to use Bardic poetry as a source for contemporary Gaelic attitudes to the Tudor Conquest of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries have proved more controversial; some scholars maintain that the conventions of Bardic poetry prevented poets from offering a meaningful literary response to contemporary events, while others argue that a careful analysis of these texts can in fact reveal a great deal about the perspective of the Gaelic aristocracy on the contemporary political landscape (see Simms 1996, 210-15). Salvador Ryan (2004) has shown that Bardic religious poetry reflects changes in devotional culture over the later middle ages, developments very much in tune with the rest of Western Europe, while Wilson McLeod (2004) has made use of the evidence of Bardic poetry to propose a reassessment of our understanding of the relationship between Ireland and Scotland in the later middle ages.

**SEE ALSO:** Acallam na Senórach; Aisling (vision); Book of the Dean of Lismore; Dánta Grádha

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